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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER: IRAQ ON THE EVE OF SHARM AL SHAYKH
CONFERENCES

REF: BAGHDAD 1453 (NODIS NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker per 1.4 (b) and (d).

Maliki and His Neighborhood

11. (S) Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki will arrive in Sharm Al Shaykh under no illusions about the views his neighbors hold of him personally and his government. He resisted holding such a conference outside Iraq, concerned that others would use it to try to impose solutions upon Iraqis or to undermine his government. He reluctantly agreed due to his desire to accommodate the strong wishes of the President and the Secretary. However, once decided, he launched an effort to consult regional leaders in advance, traveling to Cairo, Kuwait, and Oman, and speaking personally to his Turkish counterpart to overcome the negative Turkish reaction to the Iraqi decision to ask Egypt to host both conferences. He and Foreign Minister Zebari even managed to persuade the Iranians to participate. He believes he enjoys a reasonable degree of good will with Egypt and his neighbors, although he remains very concerned about the depth of Saudi opposition to him and his government.

12. (S) Maliki certainly understands what the world wants from him. But he believes he is on the right course and that those Arab neighbors who criticize his government and who allow their media to broadcast outrageously inflammatory accusations of sectarian behavior have an agenda that is contrary to the interests of Iraq. He believes absolutely that he is part of an historic opportunity to establish democracy in Iraq. He is influenced heavily by those around him who believe that the non-democratic Arab neighborhood fears democracy and therefore wants his government to fail. This understanding of democracy, however, is influenced heavily by 1400 years of Shia history and thirty years of exile and secrecy. Maliki and much of the Shia coalition believe that their electoral victory entitles them to govern; pressure to negotiate genuine power sharing arrangements with others are viewed as efforts to undo the results of the elections. A negotiated arrangement would be the first step to restore the old order and to steal from the Shia what they won on election day. More often than not Maliki will assert that the Baath Party remains the greatest danger to Iraq's democracy and that former Saddamists are behind most efforts to discredit him and his government.

13. (S) Iraq's Arab neighbors cling to an almost equally idiosyncratic view of developments in Iraq, attuned mostly to evidence of sectarian bias and blind to the ongoing crimes and violence perpetrated by the Sunni insurgency. Amman, Damascus, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh host either as exiles or visitors an array of Iraqi political figures who failed to win electorally or who prefer the lifestyle of a feted

expat to the dangerous and arduous work of building political consensus inside Iraq. More often than not they attribute their suspicion of the Maliki government to their fear of Iran and its ambitions in Iraq. Some of Iraq's Arab neighbors, notably Kuwait and Jordan to a lesser extent, have taken a pragmatic approach, understanding that Iraq's Shia are not inherently pro-Iranian and that the best defense against Iranian influence in Iraq is to increase Arab cooperation with the Maliki government.

¶4. (S) The Sharm Conferences provide an opportunity to try to remove a little venom from this toxic stew. Maliki needs to make his case to his neighbors, to convince them that his vision for Iraq includes genuine reconciliation and a way to accommodate legitimate needs of Iraq's dispossessed Sunni community. We are urging him to explain what he has done: the nonsectarian nature of current security operations; efforts to restore some former army officers to their positions or providing them pensions. He needs to make clear he supports credible reform of the Debaathification system and that he and the Shia majority will approach constitutional review in a manner that will contribute to reconciliation. He will need to bring with him a delegation that represents Iraq.

¶5. (S) Iraq has modest goals for the Expanded Neighbors Conference: all the neighbors attend at the ministerial level (and so far, all are expected); the communique supports the government's efforts, pledges to cooperate against terrorism and cross-border problems, and avoids any appearance of dictating terms to the Iraqi government. An added benefit would be endorsement of plans to create working groups to tackle border security, refugees, and energy/fuel import problems.

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The Secretary's Meeting with the Prime Minister
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¶6. (S) The Sharm Al Shaykh setting reinforces the importance of Iraqi national reconciliation to the entire region. While we expect to fend off communique language that would dictate political measures for the Iraqis to take, we anticipate that in his bilaterals Maliki will hear a fairly consistent message that Iraq must move forward on national reconciliation more quickly. Themes for the Secretary's meeting with him might include:

--Acknowledgement of his efforts to reach out to his neighbors and set conditions for a positive event.

--Concrete progress on reconciliation will not only help Iraq, it will help the U.S. effort to support Iraq, and it will offset negative regional accusations that the Iraqi government is sectarian.

--Urge him to use his remarks and public messages at Sharm to draw attention to the government's actions that promote reconciliation.

--Understand that the Prime Minister does not have sufficient power to impose decisions on the Council of Representatives. But urge that he reach out to those reasonable elements within the body politic with whom he can work. This may require political compromise.

--He must find a Sunni partner who enjoys credibility regionally and domestically. If that partner does not now exist, the Prime Minister can create conditions for him to emerge. This might require some risk and sharing of power--but without it, Iraqi politics remain deadlocked. U.S. believes Tariq Al Hashemi is a potential partner; only the Prime Minister can redress his feeling of marginalization and powerlessness.

Public Messages

17. (SBU) Themes for public remarks.

-- Thank the governments of Egypt and Iraq for bringing together all the neighbors at the ministerial level as well as representatives of P-5 G-8 countries.

-- The participants came from the region and around the world because they understand the importance of a stable, independent, and unified Iraq.

-- We heard broad-based desire for Iraq to make progress toward genuine national reconciliation. The communique clearly indicated the full support of the international community for the efforts of the Iraqi government and political leadership to continue, and even accelerate, their efforts toward this goal.

--We urge Iraqis to build on this support to forge the compromises and consensus needed for political progress and national reconciliation.

--Now is the time to turn words into deeds. We want to see the working groups called for in the communique to begin their work of finding concrete, practical ways to cooperate on pressing issues such as border security, refugees, and fuel and electricity imports.

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